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ABSTRACT

Children in the emergent writing stage write in pre-conventional or emergent forms (scribbling, drawing, non-phonetic letterings, and phonetic spelling) before they write conventionally. A special education teacher in a kindergarten inclusion setting in the Bronx, New York, noticing that her students did not particularly like to write, decided and attempted to move them along from emergent to conventional writing. She introduced and implemented several different kinds of activities to foster writing. Journals were used to have students communicate with their parents through written dialogue. This also encouraged parental involvement. Scaffolding was initiated to assist the students in writing more text. Modeling was presented to demonstrate how thinking, speaking, and writing are essential in the writing process. A stuffed elephant named Babar, his book, and a journal were sent home with one child every couple of days to encourage writing while entertaining Babar and sharing an adventure with him. The teacher found that this activity was the most successful since the students were eager to take Babar home and looked forward to their turns. The highlight of this activity was that the student got to sit in the Author's Chair and read his or her journal entry to the other students. The teacher noticed that the students were speaking more to each other about what they were going to do with Babar when it was time to share an adventure. (Contains 14 references.) (Author/NKA)

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THE EMERGENCE OF CONVENTIONAL WRITING

MARIA EPSTEIN

Abstract

A teacher, noticing that her students do not particularly like to write, decides and attempts to move them along from emergent to conventional writing. I introduced and implemented several different kinds of activities to foster writing. Journals were used to have students communicate with their parents through written dialogue. This also encouraged parent involvement. Scaffolding was initiated to assist the students in writing more text. Modeling was presented to demonstrate how thinking, speaking and writing are essential in the writing process. A stuffed elephant named Babar, his book and a journal were sent home with one child every couple of days to encourage writing while entertaining Babar and sharing an adventure with him.
I found and discovered that this activity was the most successful since the students were eager to take Babar home and looked forward to their turn. The Highlight of this activity was that the student got to sit in the Author's Chair and read his/her journal entry to the other students in the class. I noticed that the students were speaking more to each other about what they were going to do with Babar when it was his/her turn to share an adventure.

ED 461 121

Children in **emergent writing** stage write in pre-conventional or emergent forms (scibbling, drawing, non-phonetic letterings and phonetic spelling) before they write conventionally.

What the Literature revealed

Research on emergent writing was given little attention prior to the 1980's (Sulzby, 1992). Sulzby (1992) points out that "the field of literacy is filled with paradoxes, seeming contradictions between appearances across interpretative contexts. One paradox concerns how difficult and complex early writing is and how easily young children seem to learn to write. By writing, I mean composing connected written discourse, although even the mechanics of handwriting and spelling appear to have developmental characteristics. On the practice level, a tragic paradox lies between kindergarten classrooms in which child are treated as if they cannot write except through

CS 217 788

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handwriting drill or copying from models and those classrooms in which all children, regardless of background, are writing freely and eagerly.

Similar attitudes toward students' writing can be found at all levels, but the practice paradox seems most vivid at kindergarten level. At kindergarten, most children are still using emergent forms of writing such as scribble, drawing, non-phonetic strings of letters, or phonetic ('invented' or 'creative') spelling, and few have made the transition to conventional writing as their preferred writing form. Most use some emergent forms, but the concepts that they hold are not yet conventional, (p. 290)

Additionally Sulzby (1992) states: "In the early part of the 1990s, what can we say about children's emergent writing? First, when given a supportive context, be it home or school, young children compose connected written discourse using emergent forms long before they hold conventional ideas about writing. Second, they move from emergent forms and understandings to become conventional writers with conventional concepts about writing. Third, writing is a social as well as individual act. Fourth, writing development from emergent to conventional understandings has been documented in the U.S. across sociocultural groups and in many other countries using different writing systems and languages. Fifth, writing development always includes reading development, so we can speak of the child as becoming 'conventionally literate.'

Sixth, children's writing has been seen flourishing in classrooms with practices that encourage children to write and read 'their own ways'; teachers in these classrooms are using knowledge about child development under rubrics such as whole language, language experience, emergent literacy, shared reading and writing, process writing, and 'kindergarten writing.' Finally, we are beginning to understand that children can also use

microcomputers as emergent literacy tools; computers, in turn, sometimes offer different possibilities for literacy than do books pencils, and paper." (p. 291)

Additionally, according to Sulzby (1992) "Children hold on to emergent forms for a long period of time, well into Kindergarten and, for some, into first grade: It is not clear whether pushing children to adopt conventional-appearing forms or to use invented spelling is advantageous; to my knowledge, no-well designed study with comparison groups has done this yet, nor have researchers designed reasonable criteria for this comparison." (p.294)

(Rubin, 1995) states "students need time to express themselves in written form. Actually writing helps students to be better writers. …If teachers spend a great deal of time in preparation and motivating techniques to stimulate the desire to write in children but allow little time for the writing activity itself, the spark, the excitement that has been ignited is hurriedly extinguished. The point to remember is that children should be allowed adequate time to write in class. After getting the proper start in class, many children will work on their own during free time and at home, finishing their compositions because they have become involved with the creative act and want to see the finished product. The option of working on compositions at home should be theirs." (p. 237)

Rubin (1995) additionally states "teachers play an essential role in children's attitude toward writing. Children who come from a home where writing is valued will continue to value it if their teachers show by their behavior that they do so, too. For those children who are not so fortunate, the teacher's attitude is especially important. If writing is used as punishment or is made onerous by having children copy lines of letters or sentences a hundred times or more, children will be 'turned off' from writing." (p. 237)

Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs

Developmentally appropriate practice is generally regarded by early childhood experts as the best approach for teaching young children. Bredekamp & Copple (1997) clearly outline **Appropriate Practices** as follows:

> . Teachers use a variety of approaches and provide daily opportunities to develop children's **language and literacy** skills through meaningful experiences, such as listening to and reading stories and poems; taking field trips; dictating stories; seeing classroom charts and other print in use; participating in dramatic play and other experiences requiring communication; talking informally with other children and adults; and experimenting with writing by drawing, copying, and using their own 'invented' spelling. Adults read to children every day in various contexts,such as lap book reading to individuals, guided reading to small groups,as well as occasional large-group storytime. Children have opportunities to develop print awareness, sense of story, appreciation for literature, and understanding of the various uses of the written word, while learning particular letter names and letter-sound combinations and recognizing words that are meaningful to them (such as their names, names of friends, phrases like 'I love you,' and commonly seen functional words like *exit).* (p. 131)

Shared Writing vs. Interactive Writing

Routman (1994) commented "I sincerely believe that we should not ask children to go through any process we have not experienced ourselves. Our students must have writing models if they are to become writers, and we teachers need to be those models.

Most of us don't write with children or share our own writing. In fact, many of us don't like to write and are afraid to write. We have been conditioned by our own traditional schooling to view writing as an assignment by and for the teacher.

There are many ways to begin to become a writing model. One way to share

writing is to share a copy of a letter or a note written for a real purpose. Another way is to try a shared writing after a common class experience, such as a field trip.

I have always stressed the importance of teachers writing - and writing in front of their students." (pp. 161, 162)

Interactive writing, a form of shared writing, is part of the early literacy lesson framework developed by educators at The Ohio State University to provide rich, educative experiences for young children, particularly those considered to be educationally at risk. The framework draws on the concept of emergent literacy, a term coined by Clay (1966).

Button (1992) explains "Interactive writing differs from shared writing in two important ways. First, children take an active role in the writing process by actually holding the pen and doing the writing. Second, the teacher's role changes as she scaffolds and explicates the children's emerging knowledge about print."

Thereafter, Button, Johnson and Furgerson (1996) recommend that "to guide the interactive writing process and make children's knowledge about print explicit, the teacher might ask questions such as these: 'How many words are there in our sentence?' 'Where do we begin writing?' 'After writing one word, what do we have to remember to do? Why?' 'What word are we writing next?' 'Say the word slowly. What sounds to you hear?' 'Can you write the letter that stands for that sound?' 'Can you find the letter on our alphabet chart that we need to write?' 'What comes at the end of the sentence?' 'Would that make sense' 'Does that look right?' 'Would you point and read what we have written so far' (pp. 447-448)

These questions and the instruction they represent vary according to the knowledge and needs of the children. For children beginning the process, the teacher may need to

attend more to letter formation. At times the teacher many show a child a model or assist the child with the formation of the needed letter. As children gain competence, attention may shift to punctuation, capitalization, prefixes, suffixes, and phonetic structures such as digraphs, consonant blends, and vowel patterns.

An interactive writing lesson need not be lengthy. …The power of the lesson lies not in the length of the text constructed but in the quality of the interaction.

The environment the teacher creates during this process should support risk taking. Children are encouraged to take an active role in negotiating the text. (p. 449)

Interactive writing provides an authentic means for instruction in phonics and other linguistic patterns within the context of meaningful text. Children learn the conventions of spelling, syntax and semantics as they engage in the construction of letters, lists, and stories. Interactive writing is a tool that puts reading and learning about conventions into a dynamic relationship. As children attend to meaningful text, they develop their knowledge of the conventions embedded in that text. As they gain more knowledge of conventions, they are able to construct and interpret more sophisticated messages. (pp. 453-454.)"

Description of Class

I am in the process of moving my Kindergarten Inclusion class from the emergent writing stage to the conventional writing stage. My students are Special Education children and although the classifications given on their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are Speech and Language Delays, there are other delays that I have observed which impedes the learning process.

Many if not all of the students were not exposed to the writing mechanics before entering school. Several of the children were in some kind of pre-k program and I'm sure

they were exposed to letters and picture drawing, but I would say that the majority were not encouraged at home to write and draw.

Most of the children know their alphabet and letter sounds and with help from the teacher can put letters together to make words, but there are a few who do not. However, this doesn't mean that we don't encourage them to write.

As I said before I am a Special Education teacher in an Inclusion setting working in a school in the Bronx. In this program, the ratio of the class is 25:2:1; 15 General Education, 10 Special Education , 2 teachers and 1 paraprofessional. We were very fortunate this year because in September our enrollment was 11 children – 10 Special Education and 1 General Education. In January, we lost the General Education student; she moved away, but in February another Special Education student was placed in our class. So we have 11 students, all Special Education. This is a very unusual setting and next September we won't be so fortunate. However, because of the small class size, we can give the students more individualized attention.

Because we are a Chancellor School, reading and writing are strongly stressed throughout all the grades – we are a Pre-K to 8th Grade School.

Implementation in the Classroom

Getting Started

In September, the General Education teacher and I worked out a program whereby we began the year by incorporating into our writing curriculum, Games for Writing – Playful Ways to Help Your Child Learn to Write by Peggy Kaye, which is a book of games for children from Kindergarten to Third Grade.

For several weeks, we have the students work on a few of the exercises to start them on the road to becoming proficient writers. We supply the students with jumbo pencils and crayons which aids them in correctly grasping the writing tool and helps with the development of their fine motor skills. Thereafter, we use the manual Handwriting Skills: Learning Manuscript Writing and have the students work on the five basic strokes (horizontal, vertical, diagonal lines –left to right, right to left – and backward circles which will assist them in learning to construct the alphabet letters.

We do writing daily in the classroom and in the beginning of the school year students draw and then write about their pictures. It can be letters in isolation or a string of letters. At this time the other teacher or I ask the child to read what he/she has written. We transcribe what they say onto a post-it note and place it on the back of the paper. Most of the students just draw and write their names, if they are able. Throughout this period we are introducing letters of the alphabet (Letter Investigation) weekly and although at this point we don't have to, we also teach them the sound the letter makes.

Modeling

In November, we introduced formal writing to the students and we modeled the process for them on the chalkboard. We let the students know that writing is a process which begins in our mind. We think about what we want to write. We then discuss our ideas with our classmates, sort of like a rehearsal, and then we write our thoughts down. We go from thinking to verbalizing to writing. We practice this technique whole class often during the next month or so. We brainstorm about what we want to write and then they dictate the words to me. I say the words and ask them to sound them out and spell them for me. Whatever they say, I write using invented spelling. I correctly model using a

capital letter at the beginning of a sentence, I use my finger to leave spaces between words and discuss punctuation as we write. After this whole class activity, we move on to individual writing.

Success for All Reading Program

In early February we start our reading program KinderRoots which is a part of the Success for All Program. Every week a different letter is introduced, as well as a companion book and vocabulary words. Last year KinderRoots consisted of 15 lessons but this year five more lessons have been added, making 20 in all. This program has a writing component as well.

In addition, after we returned from Mid-Winter Break, I told the students we were going to write about what we did that week. I told them to select only one day to write about. I modeled on the chalkboard for them. I told them that my daughter Elizabeth (they had met Elizabeth when she accompanied me to school a few weeks earlier) and I had taken my grandson, Vinny to Story Time at the library. This is what I wrote with their help still using invented spelling. Liz (I used this shorter version of Elizabeth) and I tuk Viny to stori tim at the libri. I signed the bottom Mrs. Epstein and I explained that I had to identify who "I" was in the sentence because if I didn't sign my name then anyone reading my sentence who was not present when I wrote it, would not know who "I" was.

Scaffolding

The other teacher and I use scaffolding to help the students write. Scaffolding is the process of providing and gradually removing, external support for learning. During scaffolding, the task itself is not changed, but what the learner initially does is made easier

with assistance. Gradually, the level of assistance decreases, as the learner takes more responsibility for performance of the task.

We usuai', work with a group of four. Three work on their pictures (this is still a big part of their writing) while we work individually with the fourth. The paraprofessional also works with a group. This assistance by us has greatly improved the students' writing, as well as their confidence in writing. Even though we are helping the students, they write what they hear. To date some still have difficulty hearing the correct vowels needed in the words.

Our classroom is print rich. We use experience charts, incorporate a variety of functional signs and labels, and we model writing constantly. In addition, the vocabulary words from the two prior stories, as well as the current KinderRoot story are displayed.

When I did my Student Teaching in the Spring of 1997, the teacher with whom I was assigned to work used a stuffed bear and a journal to encourage her students to write.

Every weekend a different child had a turn taking the bear and journal home. They had to write in the journal how they spent their weekend with the stuffed bear. When the child returned to school on Monday, he/she shared the journal entry with his/her classmates. This project was commenced in September and in a class with 20 students, each student got to take the stuffed bear and journal at least two or three times throughout the school year. It was fun and very interesting to see the students' writing progression during this period.

The Adventures of Babar

This activity gave me the idea for my own writing project with my students. I had a stuffed elephant named Babar at home. He had belonged to my youngest child, Elizabeth.

I washed Babar, went to Barnes and Noble and bought a copy of The Story of Babar by Jean DeBrunhoff, used a notebook for a writing journal, and put everything inside a canvas bag. In addition, I include a note to the parent(s) explaining what I would like the child to do, as well as their role in the activity.

I took the bag to school and introduced Babar to the students. I told them that Babar is a very sophisticated elephant who has traveled to all parts of the world in search of a good adventure. Every few days a different child would have the opportunity to take Babar home for an adventure. Because it is so late in the school year, I decided to send Babar home very couple of days rather than only over the weekends.

To familiarize the student and parent with the story of Babar, I ask the parent to read the book to their child; discuss the story and think of ways to entertain Babar. Babar should be made part of the family and included in all the goings on in the home. The adventure has to be written down in the journal and the child gets to read and share the entry with his/her classmates when he/she returns Babar.

Since I only just began this project, I can't tell if it will be successful. To date only three students have had the opportunity to take Babar home. I know that the students are eager to participate.

Another idea to encourage writing came about from an article I read. In the article, the author, a teacher, used a dialogue journal to encourage student/parent interaction in the home. Hanson (1994)

Dialogue Journals

Every Friday the teacher would assign a writing topic to the students. One week she had the students draw a picture. On a separate sheet of paper the student wrote "Do

you like my picture?" The parent had to respond to the question. The student got to decide if he/she wanted to share the information with the class. Of course, the teacher read all the entries. Another writing idea was having the parent dictate a list to the child. The child would write it all down on a sheet of journal page.

A few weeks ago on a Friday, I tried this activity with my students. Unfortunately that day because of a heavy rainfall, only five students came to school. On Monday, three students shared their picture and dialogue entry with the class. One child did not do the assignment, and one child was absent.

The Friday after we returned to school from Spring Break, I tried this assignment again. This time all the students were present. The six children who did not do the first assignment were asked to draw a picture and to add the question "Do you like my picture?" The other five received another assignment. I wrote on the top of the page "You are going to the supermarket to pick up a few items. Please dictate a list of the things you need to your child and have him/her write them down." I'm eager to return to school tomorrow to see the results.

Writing about Their Week ends

Every Monday I sit with about four students and I ask them to tell me what they did over the week-end. While I work with one child, the other three are drawing a picture of what they did. I try to get to as many students as possible in the 20 minutes allotted before the start of the school day. I usually stretch this activity out over the week so that students can add sentences to the writing. When I first did this kind of writing with the students, I only had them write one sentence because that was only what they were able to write. Now I ask them to build on the prior sentence so that they do more writing. An example of this

follows: Sheila told me that she went to the store with her mother. I asked "what did your mother buy?" She said "she buy me candy." I encouraged her to write that. So instead of one sentence, she had two. Another child told me that she played outside with her new sister. I asked "what's her name?" She told me and I encouraged her to write the sister's name. I'm trying to get them to write more than one sentence.

Author's Chair

Because of the Author's Chair, the students are writing more in the class. This past week we went on a trip to the New York Harbor and we rode the Staten Island Ferry. When we returned to class we had the children write about what they saw. After each child had an opportunity to read his/her paper to the class, we put all the collected writing in a folder and it's on display.

Conclusion

I have gleaned from all the articles and books I read and reviewed that children should be encouraged to write and given the opportunity to write often. I have provided numerous occasions and rich experiences, as well as varied types and kinds of writing with support and structure, to guide them in their transition and growth from scribbling, to invented spelling and to conventional writing.

Since I am a believer in developmentally appropriate practices for young children, the environment I create in my classroom reflects this belief.

I have seen tremendous growth in my students' writing. I don't hear as many moans and groans. Not only are they eager to write; they actually want to write. I feel the other teacher and I have given them a good foundation and have paved the way for their continued success in writing.

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